

# OUR CURRY HERITAGE

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## Anna Baright Curry

### Her Life

Anna Baright was the founder of the institution that became the School of Expression, which became Curry College. She was born into a Quaker family in Poughkeepsie, New York, in 1854, and died in Boston in 1924. She was graduated from Cook's Collegiate Institute in 1873. After teaching in New York state and in Milwaukee Female College, she entered the Boston University School of Oratory in 1875. In 1877 she was graduated Cum Laude.

School of Oratory Dean Lewis B. Monroe appointed her his First Assistant. They were planning this country's first summer school of oratory, to be held on Martha's Vineyard, in 1879, when Monroe died. Anna Baright carried on the work, and the five-week term was highly successful. But shortly after Monroe died, the university demoted the School of Oratory to a department in the School of All Sciences, and appointed to carry on the work a young man, thereafter Snow Professor of Oratory, who had studied with Monroe, and whom Monroe had referred to Miss Baright as a private student—Samuel Silas Curry.

### Her School

With the encouragement of the Boston University President, Anna Baright set up her own school, the School of Elocution and Expression in October 1879. Its 1881 announcement proclaims its

avowed purpose of carrying out the grand and distinctive principle of the system of Lewis B. Monroe, A. M., as taught in the late Boston University School of Oratory, viz.: 'Expression is the outward manifestation of that which is already in the consciousness.'

The two-year course, patterned after that of the Boston University School of Oratory, included Physical Culture, Aesthetic Gymnastics, Vocal Training, Speaking, Articulation, Delsarte's Philosophy of Expression, Lectures and Public Reading, Artistic Reading, Bible and Hymn Reading, and "Special and Comprehensive Cultural Courses."

### Her Relationship to S. S. Curry

On May 31, 1882, Anna Baright married Samuel Silas Curry, on condition that he give up the ministry and join her in teaching. In 1885 the Boston University trustees gave him permission to merge his private classes into the School of Elocution and Expression. The name was changed to the School of Expression. In 1888 it was chartered by the state, and Curry left his Boston University position. S. S. Curry became the school's head, called variously over the years Principal, Dean, and President; Mrs. Curry served as teacher and as what eventually was called Dean. The Currys had six children, and continued to run the school until S. S. Curry's death in 1921.

She was referred to as "the greatest woman reader in the country" (*reader* here meaning an oral presenter of literary works) and a superb teacher. School of Expression alumna Lenice Bacon described her as follows:

Well-born, with the social graces highly developed, Mrs. Curry's penetrating eyes saw everything and in her beautifully modulated voice she insisted on perfect decorum. There was no

"sloppy" dress nor manners at the School of Expression. But in spite of her high standards, and the all-seeing eyes, we had a wonderful time, working in a relaxed atmosphere, dancing informally during the fifteen-minute periods between classes.

Curry referred to her as "the inspiration of the School of Expression."

### Contrasting Currys

Contrasting the two Currys, their son, Haskell Curry, the late noted mathematician and logician, said:

Her students considered her a really great teacher; whereas he was entertaining and stimulating, she was remarkable for clarity and for the penetrating criticism which drove the point home. It was said that she was the practical business manager of the school, whereas he was the creative idealist—but although there is some truth in this, it is certainly an oversimplification.

While the two Currys had their divergent temperaments and strong convictions, and often disagreed forcefully, they agreed on the essential orientation of the School, and made their own special contributions to it. They were united in their concern to go beyond the superficial approach of many teachers of elocution and to make vocal expression an art in their fullest understandings of the term. For more of what this meant, it is necessary to turn to a consideration of S. S. Curry.

## Samuel Silas Curry

### Overall Characterization of Curry

Mrs. Bacon recalled:

Most people who had the privilege of knowing Dr. Curry considered him an idealist, somewhat of a mystic, some devotees going so far as to call him a "saint," but all seem to agreed that he was first and foremost a philosopher.

It was observed of him that he "had the soul of a poet and the mind of a philosopher."

In order to understand adequately S. S. Curry's views on education, it is necessary to consider his life and his outlook on all life. So I shall touch on (1) his life, especially as it relates to his emphasis on individualism in a universal perspective, (2) his overall philosophy, which necessarily includes much in relation to expression, (3) his philosophy of education, and (4) his attention given to meeting the needs of individual students.

### Curry's Early Life and Education as Contributing to his Individualism

#### Curry's Family and Geographical Heritage

Samuel Silas Curry was thrust into the midst of individualism. First, he was born in a simple farm house in Chatata, in East Tennessee, on November 23, 1847, into a family that included Daniel Boone, Kit Carson, and Davy Crockett. He also was born into the rigors of farming life, including the difficulties of the four years of the Civil War, in which the armies of the North (to which East Tennessee remained loyal) and the South kept moving across the state, and taking from the farm whatever they wanted. There were

no schools operating there at that time, so Curry "and his brothers, after working on the farm all day, studied by themselves late into the night before the pine-knot light of the fireplace."

When Haskell Curry visited his father's birthplace about a decade after Curry's death, he was impressed by two facts. The first was that Curry was brought up "in intimate contact with the out-of-doors." He added that Curry "all his life . . . had a love of nature, and he knew it not as one who learned it from books, but as one who has lived with it in childhood."

The second [fact that stood out for Haskell Curry] is that there was a profoundly religious, indeed somewhat ascetic, atmosphere; he started his career as a Methodist minister, and he retained to his death an instinctive aversion—overcome, to be sure, at times, but always there in strength—to tobacco, alcohol, or a deck of cards.

While that attitude may have been conventional, especially in Curry's day, Haskell Curry noted that Curry

had relatively little respect for conventions. He insisted on wearing a wing collar two or three sizes too big, a big loose necktie with a stick pin through the center of the knot, and a Prince Albert coat, even after such a costume had begun to look a little odd. . . . In situations where spontaneity and naturalness were at a premium, however, he would often shine. He had a keen sense of humor and was a superb teller of jokes.

### Curry's Taking Charge of his Education

The second factor in Curry's individualism was in his taking charge of his own education. He gave up his right of inheritance and earned his expenses from his days at East Tennessee Wesleyan

University, from which he was graduated with honors in 1872, through his time at Boston University, where he earned his S.T.B. ministerial degree in 1875, his diploma from the School of Oratory and his M.A. degree, both in 1878, and his Ph.D. degree in 1880, in which year he also received his diploma from Guilmette's School of Vocal Physiology. During the summers of 1880 and 1882 he studied with prominent teachers in England, Italy, and France. In 1905 Colby College awarded him a degree of Litt.D.

Curry must have been impressed by the possibility of a single person's accomplishing much through the example provided by one of his Boston University School of Oratory teachers, Alexander Graham Bell. Bell's opening lecture in 1873 "first aroused [Curry] to the possibilities of the science of voice." Bell was the Chancellor of the School of Expression from 1907 until his death in 1922, but of course, is much better known as the inventor of the telephone. Curry noted, "The discovery of the telephone took place while I was a student of Dr. Graham Bell. My studies were interrupted, greatly to my regret." Curry daughter Mabel Gelassi and Haskell Curry said that Curry was present when Bell made his first telephone call for help from Mr. Watson.

### Curry's Own Speech Problem

Third, Curry's individualistic bent was strengthened by his own speech problem and his long search to solve it. Curry relates:

One Sunday morning I stood before an audience in the middle of an address, unable to speak a word. The horror of those moments has never been blotted from my memory. The failure was a climax of several years of misuse of my voice, though during that time I had sought help from every available source. I determined to search still more diligently to find the causes of my condition.

It may be that his whole career in the study and teaching of expression was part of that search.

### Curry's Transcendentalist Heritage

The fourth important foundation for his individual-emphasizing philosophy was the transcendentalist background of the Boston University School of Oratory. In Dean Monroe this was combined with influence of (a) the French teacher of expression, Francois Delsarte (1811-1871), who emphasized the whole person, and (b) the Swedish scientist and seer, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), who maintained that every natural phenomenon corresponds to a spiritual reality that underlies it.

### Curry's Overall Philosophy

Although Curry's overall philosophy is so intertwined with his philosophy of education that any separation of the two is arbitrary, it is appropriate to take note of some highlights of his broad philosophical outlook before turning to his views on education.

Samuel Lindsay, a Curry friend and his immediate successor in the presidency, wrote:

Dr. Curry believed three things about life: That it is a good thing to live, a better thing to live long, and best of all to live well.

He believed that life was good, not evil, a blessing and not a curse. He believed that God had honored men by calling them into being. Wherever he found life expressing itself, he interpreted it in terms of goodness. He was one of the most optimistic men I ever knew.

Dr. Curry was enthusiastic about life. He lived a strenuous life, and seemed to be intrigued in everything that was worth while. His enthusiasm was contagious. He awakened the hearts of thousands to the larger things of life through that effervescent quality which was so characteristic of him.

He believed that everyone should be ambitious, to live long. . . . and thought the day would come when the average man would live to be a hundred years old.

Here are some of Curry's own words:

**One's aspirations and ideals [are] his real self.**

**Your fault is not you.**

**You ARE A SOUL and have a body.**

**What men need more than anything else for success in any calling is to test [to use] the positiveness of their attitude toward life, toward themselves, toward their work, toward truth.**

**Whatever longing is within you, consider prophetic of power, and persevere in the development of yourself. Do not crush out any aspiration. It has wider bearings on your development than you can see.**

**Your ideal . . . is the prophecy of your future, of what you may become.**

**Respect your ideals. Dare to dream, but be not an idle dreamer. Dare to DO what you DREAM. Search your heart to know what you most desire to do; then do it, for you can become, by perseverance, what you long to be.**



**All expression comes FROM WITHIN OUTWARD, from the center to the surface, from a hidden source to outward manifestation.**

**The study of expression as a natural process brings you into contact with cause, and makes you feel the source of reality.**

**The real center of all our battles is in the mind, in our own power to control our attention, to be able to change the current of thought at the very beginning.**

**The higher the form of life, the more the co-operation. To shut yourself up, even in your own reserve, is to fetter all possibilities.**

**The mission of the School [is to] show you what you are. It will train you to use your powers . . . It will bring you into touch with your fellow-men, so that you can show them the life that stirs in you. It will enable you to distinguish . . . the truth from error, the spirit from form, your real self from faults and perversions. . . . [It] aids men to know the difference between appearance and reality [and] to feel the difference between what appears and what really is.**

The last few sentences bring us more clearly to Curry's philosophy of education.

### Curry's Philosophy of Education

Curry saw himself as continuing the work of the pioneers of modern education, and referred specifically to Comenius, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Froebel.

Curry saw

all the reforms in education for the past two hundred years [as having] been in the direction of expression. . . .to harmonize the education of the mind with the education of the body, to co-ordinate the power of thinking, and the power of feeling, and to harmonize all the faculties of the mind . . .

Curry referred with apparent approval to Frobel's observation that "all education was emancipation" and added,

if so, a study of expression affords one of the most effective means of removing all repression. . . . [He added that] to develop the highest power in expression abnormal traits of character must be corrected, and all the powers be brought into simultaneous co-operation. . . .

Curry explained his basic educational principles in terms of the thought of Pestalozzi, who emphasized the importance of two sides of education:

reception, or acquisition, on the one hand, and production, or creation, on the other. We call these two phases of education Impression and Expression.

### Curry's Attention to Individual Needs

Curry's overall philosophy naturally led to individual student attention.

The 1885 first catalog of the School of Expression provided great flexibility for students to choose courses in accordance with their needs and available time,

so that no student is retarded by being a member of a class. By this arrangement, also, students can elect a course suited to their individual needs, or students of neighboring colleges and schools can elect steps according to their time, and thus take a full course by extending it over a longer period.

The school's emphasis on individual attention is found in catalogs such as that of 1900-1901, saying:

Every student is requested to call and have his needs analyzed, and receive suggestions for work from one of the teachers sometime before the opening of school.

Personal concern for students extended well beyond the classroom. The School carefully supervised the housing that students could find in the neighborhood.

The catalog notes that "All regular students receive free individual assistance." "Those who have attended three years of full courses are not charged for tuition."

The rather wide array of offerings in mostly two and three year programs leading to the General Diploma, Public Readers' or Dramatic Artists' Diploma, Teachers' Diploma, Speakers' Diploma, Literature Diploma, and Artistic Diploma, the last of which required four years of study. There were "special courses" under the categories:

1. clergymen and speakers
2. public school teachers
3. students of literature and those intending to become writers
4. life and art courses [for attaining "a higher ideal of personal perfection"]

5. children's courses
6. evening classes
7. stammerers
8. normal course in gymnastics

The catalog emphasized:

The first aim of the School is [and the rest of the sentence is in capital letters in the catalog] TO ATTAIN THE HIGHEST IDEAL OF MANHOOD AND WOMANHOOD.

### Waning and Waxing Curry Influence

Catalogs a decade after Curry's death, expressing Curry's thought—and our own endeavors—summarized the function of the institution in the following words:

**From the beginning, the School of Expression has measured its usefulness largely by its ability *to take people where it finds them* and, through training, to enable them to realize their powers and possibilities.**

From studying the catalogs, one gets the impression that until the 1930's the School remained much as Curry left it, but as the institution added a wide variety of courses in and out of the area of speech and, in 1938, was given the power to grant degrees, the influence of S. S. Curry waned rapidly. By the time that the name was changed officially from school to college 50 years ago (April 21, 1943) probably there was little distinctively Curry about the institution. Certainly when I arrived in 1966 any remaining S. S. Curry tradition must have been limited to a few trustees and alumni. The College had fallen to so low a state by the early 1960's that people would have been happy to forget that it had a past. The prevailing emphasis rightly was on becoming worthy of accreditation,

which we achieved in 1970. This meant becoming a traditional liberal arts college. I do not recall that in those days anyone in the administration or faculty ever suggested that there was a Curry heritage that still could be of value to us. Although Lenice Bacon wrote her unpublished reminiscences a little earlier and at least once presented them to a College gathering, it was from research done in connection with the 1979 centennial that we began to learn very much of what the institution had been in the days of the Currys. Since then there has been a slowly growing appreciation of the early Curry heritage.

### Conclusion

The Currys provided a remarkably comprehensive, holistic, education in the context of teaching public speaking—which sometimes seems to have been little more than an opportunity for plumbing the depths of reality and joyously finding oneself in its flow. No characterization of what has been called The Curry Method does it full justice; my own attempt is to say that it is an uncompromising completeness of approach to achieving practical wholeness of living—involving intuition, thought, research, feeling, and physical expression. It includes all that one could want in a traditional, intellectual liberal education, but goes beyond that to link it to a conscious drawing out of whatever creative something lies at the heart of one's existence, and facilitates one in expressing that creative synthesis in some constructive form.

There is little or nothing in the 1991 Mission Statement of Curry College that was not explicitly found in the statements of the Currys or clearly implied by them. Probably the only major difference is the omission of something that Curry considered essential: the metaphysical search to distinguish appearance from reality.

Increasingly in recent decades we have found that a world alien to the beliefs and practices of the Currys does not work in any important sense. Humankind has begun to learn that people must not be treated as if they were machines, that mind plays the central role in living, that thought, feeling, and bodily expression must be united for fullest humanity, that something splendid can be expressed by anyone who is willing to devote the effort to draw on his or her inherent resources and on those of people cooperating to bring out the best in their fellow beings.

Perhaps the best test of any philosophy is the extent to which it is applicable in times and situations that its originator scarcely could imagine. We now can see that Curry spoke not only to the late 19th and early 20th centuries; the core of his message is perennial; it matters little whether we attach the name of Curry to it, but it is the case—as we should recognize—that we are the heirs to an outlook of extremely great worth, generalizable and extendable as far beyond anything that we know as it was beyond anything that Curry experienced. We proudly and humbly can claim our legacy of the Curry approach to living and learning. The Curry spirit of appreciation and application of universally active creativity was and is correct, is very much needed, and to a considerable extent consciously is at work again here and now under the honored name of Curry.

We have much reason to be proud of the Currys, who not only dreamt a great dream, but dared to do what they dreamt, to translate their educational ideals into an institution that we are privileged to hold in our hands and minds and hearts today. May we never forget the struggles and dreams of the Currys and their successors of seven decades. May we be worthy to carry on, to develop, and live the multi-faceted dream that, in whatever forms it may produce, will be the outflowing of something very good, very deep within, and very beautifully and powerfully expressed.